

EREV ROSH HA-SHANAH

Democracy and Autocracy

I speak often of a trip that Shara and I took to Russia in 2002. We spent two months in St. Petersburg working with a non-profit Jewish organization dedicated to training teachers throughout the former Soviet Union. We then spent one month in Moscow, where we taught at a seminar for those teachers.

We were in Russia at an incredibly exciting time for the country. The wall that had divided east and west Germany had fallen only twelve years earlier. There was hope amongst people, and they were dreaming about the future and what life could be like.

In the Jewish community especially, there was a growing sense that a new Russia was being born – one that would allow for a vibrant and meaningful Judaism to flourish.

During the summer we were there, Shara and I met with teachers and artists and musicians. We took an overnight train from St. Petersburg to Moscow, where we listened to the dreams of our new friends, drank tea with them and had just a little bit of vodka.

While we there, we also saw an emerging new class of wealthy Russians – who seemed to have so much more money than the people around them. They were called the new Russians, and we later learned that the wealthiest amongst them—known as the Oligarchs—had been plotting alongside Vladimir Putin to remain in power for a long time.

Vladimir Putin came to power in 1999, chosen by Russian president Boris Yeltsin to be his successor. At the time, Putin was recognized as the oligarch's best chance to hold on to wealth and power. Putin was an

ex-KGB officer who had spent his career working behind the iron wall in East Germany.

Putin told the Russian people that he would protect them from dangerous enemies and that he would advance the cause of bringing a new Russia to life. At the time, even politicians in the United States seemed to be trusting of this new leader. President George W. Bush announced to the world that he saw Putin's soul.

Today, we know full well who Vladimir Putin is – he is a bully, a power-hungry tyrant – one who has no real ideology. His only purpose is to remain in power and to take out his opponents.

That is the only reason for this war in Ukraine. No matter Putin's claims about the war, we know full well what is truly happening.

Vladimir Putin is amongst a rising tide of autocrats who seek to remain in power and to expand their control over their people. Whether it be in Poland, in Venezuela, in Cuba, in Hungary or in China, autocrats are on the rise.

What these men hate most is democracy—that system of government that empowers the many and aims to protect the rights of the few. Today's autocrats do everything in their power to limit the voices of dissent and to disregard the dignity and the equality of people.

Today's autocrats work in sophisticated manners – as journalist Anne Applebaum writes, "Nowadays, autocracies are run not by one bad guy, but by sophisticated networks composed of kleptocratic financial structures, security services and professional propagandists".

Today's autocrats have gained support from people who we would otherwise expect to disregard them. By appealing to populist financial concerns and xenophobia, we've seen otherwise liberal-minded people willing to support the worst of humanity.

The war in Ukraine is the latest step in the autocratic playbook. Vladimir Putin is deathly scared of Ukraine's democracy – he sees it as a direct threat to his own power and he will take as many lives as he needs to in order to destroy it.

Now, Judaism did not create the idea of democracy—that was the purview of the Greeks – but Judaism did encourage a democratic way of thinking. Our people have long recognized that a system of governance empowering the many is much better than one which only empowers the few.

Historically, Jews have not fared well under autocracies. Even those autocrats who initially appealed to our sensibilities eventually went on to use antisemitism as a tool from holding onto power.

From Haman to Antiochus Epiphanes, from the Holy Roman Empire to Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin, authoritarianism and autocracy have always been pitted against Jews and Judaism.

Last March, a video appeared on Facebook from Rabbi Alex Duchovny, the head Rabbi of the Ha-Tikvah congregation in Kiev, Ukraine.

Alex spoke from the basement of a five-story building— as the Russian air force had begun a missile bombardment of his city. He was in that basement every night with his family for weeks until he was able to escape to Israel, where he is today.

As I watched him speak, I couldn't help but think of that trip Shara and I took to Russia in 2002.

On that trip, we had met a group of Ukrainian Jews who were visiting Moscow with great excitement about their future. We met Jews from Estonia and Kyrgystan and Georgia – Jews who expressed hope that their new nations—no longer part of the Soviet Union—their new nation

was going to protect them. They felt that Russia was no longer a threat to their freedom.

As I listened to Rabbi Dochovny speak from that basement in March, I thought about the hope that Shara and I witnessed in 2002, hope about a democratic future for those in Russia and former Soviet republics.

Twenty years later, twenty years after Shara and I traveled to Russia, so much has changed. Our friends whom we met -- some have left for Israel while others remain at risk at home.

My friends, democracies are fragile. They are incredibly fragile. Because they empower so many, they give opportunities for bad actors to rise.

We who live in the United States must understand this today now more than ever. Especially as Jews, we must learn the lesson that Vladimir Putin is teaching to the entire world.

Democracies are fragile – they are easily manipulated by those who seek power and want to stay in power. If we truly seek a world of compassion and justice, a world where the individual matters and is seen as godly, then we must protect our democracies and we must ensure their future.

During Yom Kippur, we will be reading from *Parashat Nitzavim*, which includes one of the most powerful scenes in the entire Torah.

It is the moment when the Israelites stand at Sinai waiting to receive the Torah from God. We read how they all stand together, and the rabbis note in their commentaries that every Jew who was and ever will be born stood there with them.

The moment is meant to demonstrate to all of us this deep sense not just of equality – but of responsibility.

Our text tells us – *ATEM NEETZAVEEM, KOOL-CHEM.*

You all stand here. All of you.

We all stood together at a mountain and we all witnessed one another – at that moment, we recognized our mutual obligations to one another.

You see, Sinai was a great democratic moment in which we understood that power must never rest only in the hands of the few. We can only meet our mutual obligations when we share power and create systems to guarantee that sharing. Democracy is our best chance to ensure that we remain our brother and sisters' keepers.

My friends, let us open these High Holy Days by turning to the threat that faces our world and yes, our nation.

A threat of authoritarianism where one party or person controls the many – a threat we have known too often in our history, a threat we must stand against...even in our country

Let us embrace the idea of democracy – of rule by the people – and let us protect democracy in the name of the values we hold most dear.

The story of creation teaches us that we all share a soul – we all came from one source, we are one human fabric, and it is incumbent upon us to protect any system of government that protects all of us...

Shanah Tovah.

